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PROWLER:
Stories

by
Conor Hultman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford
May 2019

Approved by

Advisor: Professor Beth Ann Fennelly

Reader: Professor Dustin Parsons

Reader: Dr. Kathryn McKee

DEDICATION

For Emma Richardson, who got me started,
and for Beth Ann Fennelly, who kept me going.

ABSTRACT
CONOR HULTMAN: Prowler: Stories
(Under the direction of Beth Ann Fennelly)

These are a collection of five short stories. Their common feature is the use of the first-person perspective. The intent of these prose experiments was to find the limitations of the first-person narrative, to see how it could be disfigured and reborn. In preparation, I read several books with my advisor that are known for their strong first-person voices. These included: *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* by Tim O'Brien, *Always Happy Hour* by Mary Miller, *The Mezzanine* by Nicholson Baker, *Birds of America* by Lorrie Moore, and *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel*. I also undertook personal research, drawing inspiration from the writings of Stephen Dixon and Larry Brown, among others. What I found was that, for all the rules that are often associated with short story writing, successful stories are as unlike as possible. I began to feel I had the right to experiment in every facet of my work. Under the direction of my advisor, I learned to mettle these flights of imagination with sense and taste. The result is a chapbook of very short fiction, sometimes funny, often mean, with its fingers on the pulse of modernity.

INTRODUCTION

The desire to focus on the first-person came from the idea of expression. In a traditional, third-person point-of-view story, the characters exist mostly through their actions and speech; sometimes they are allowed monologuing thoughts, or else a narrator gives vent to their feelings. However, the first-person comes the closest to overcoming simulacra, attempting to reproduce the thought patterns and speech, internal and external, of its narrator. It is this affinity with the real that attracted me. I wondered how I might use structural fidelity for strange purposes, to make the real unreal. I decided I would limit myself either to writing in the traditional first-person (as with “Ballard Park in the Dark” and “Barber Illusions”), abusing the first-person (“Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” and “Prowler”), or else surprising the reader with a third-person narrator who is actually a first-person narrator (“The Skywriter”).

With the concept for this experiment on paper, I sought out Beth Ann Fennelly to be my advisor. I have had her for several classes, most pertinent of which was a “Hybrid Literature” course. In that class, I read such emerging and evolving forms as microfiction and the lyric essay. I knew that Professor Fennelly would be supportive of my experimental writing, considering her own work and my experience with her in class. When she had agreed to advise my thesis, we then started to draw up a reading list. We chose novels, short story collections, and memoirs that would help me understand and practice the first-person. After finishing a book, we met and discussed the book, comparing it with my recently finished short story.

If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home by Tim O’Brien was chosen because his work is famous for blending fiction and non-fiction, lulling the reader into his confidence with a strong and captivating voice. The way he converted fiction into truth was something I wanted to master and reverse.

I had read the other books of Mary Miller, so when her newest story collection *Always Happy Hour* came out, I knew it would do to read it for my research. Miller’s stories are lush with humor and common day insight. Their pacing is of fascination to me; nothing much technically happens, but nonetheless the stories hurry the reader onward. I wanted to be able to break the confines of typical storytelling, to grace slice-of-life with strong pacing and climax.

The Mezzanine, by Nicholson Baker, was incredibly useful as a demonstration of how much beauty and meaning can be squeezed out of the smallest things. It is an incredible novella about the thoughts a man has while on an escalator. The outward narrative happens in a few seconds, but the inward observation telescopes over the micro and macro. By reading Baker, I felt justified when zeroing in on small things; *The Mezzanine* shows that any subject can fill a book.

Lorrie Moore’s *Birds of America* taught me a lot about humor; how it can be set up over twenty pages, or packed into a single line. If there is anything funny in my stories, I partly owe it to her.

The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel was the conviction I needed to stop worrying about the length of my stories. Many of Hempel’s finest stories are no longer than a page or two. They prove that compression is an underappreciated and misunderstood asset to the short story form.

Finally, Stephen Dixon was a writer whose work I discovered during the writing of my thesis. His novel *Too Late*, a mystery more about the daily frustrations of its detective than the fate of the missing person (spoiler: he's "too late"), lit me up creatively. Dixon writes with a bewildering concoction of streetwise stream-of-conscious, gabby absurdity, and deflective irony. His work continues to inspire me.

Here I will summarize each story and explain my inspirations and intentions. "Ballard Park in the Dark" is my swing at a cyberpunk story set in Mississippi. In preparation for writing in the genre, I closely read the work of seminal cyberpunk author William Gibson, namely *Neuromancer* and *Burning Chrome*. Like Gibson, I tried to make the world consistent and imaginable, without explaining too much on the front end. I wanted the voice to be punchy like Gibson's, with a noirish pace offset by the absurdity of the setting. The title is a reference to a piece by American composer Charles Ives, "Central Park in the Dark." Ives' symphonies were of conceptual inspiration to me; his atonal and experimental music is threaded through with countless references to religious hymns, bandstand tunes, patriotic songs, and folk classics. The themes of "Ballard Park in the Dark" are the separation of self from environment, derealization, and how the past haunts the future. The settings are two places I know, Ballard Park and the Mall at Barnes Crossing, both in Tupelo, Mississippi. I had fun imagining how this "casting" technology would affect these familiar environments. I would like to expand this story, possibly into a novel. For my thesis, I kept the narrative to a succinct and representative story.

With "Barber Illusions," I tried to break down a narrator, offer him a modicum of hope, and dash it for maximum despair. In this way, "Barber Illusions" is a shaggy dog story. The location and observations were taken from my lived experience, although expanded by hyperbole. This story bears the most noticeable fingerprints of Stephen Dixon's work. The balance of humor and depression was something I learned from Dixon's novels and stories. The themes include the inconsistency between television and reality, expectation versus truth, and the corruption of possibility.

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" takes its name from the painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which consists of a pastoral landscape with Icarus drowning insignificantly out in the distance off-center. I intended the flash fiction to be a rebuttal to Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts." Auden's poem takes the same painting as its subject, and it comes to the conclusion that the painting is a lament for man's ignorance toward his fellow man's suffering. I think that the painting is less emotional and more realistic than that. In my opinion, it is possible to feel sympathy for the plowman, the shepherd, and the angler in the painting, even while Icarus drowns. Perhaps their mundane toiling lives can be just as tragic as Icarus' fall. Therefore, I include the "splash" of Icarus hitting the water in the direct center of the page, splicing a word, yet hiding in plain sight among the plowman's tumbling angry voice. I experimented with syntax in this story, going for a truncated voice composed mainly of sentence fragments. I hope that through this format, I achieve a sense of the narrator's pain and duress, drawing sympathy for the ideological conclusion.

"The Skywriter" was an exercise in disguising narrators. I used the content of the story as an explanation of the form, ending with a confused relationship between form and content. I struggled with the pacing, as well as the character of the skywriter. I decided to aim for a more allegorical story, drawing representative characters and setting over specifics. In this way, I was particularly inspired by Donald Barthelme's story "The

Balloon,” another piece where content is the form the content exists in. My themes were the futility of expression and the attractive quality of language.

The titular story, “Prowler,” was the hardest to write on all counts. I was worried about being overly gratuitous, and I worried that the perspective didn’t make sense, and I worried about the pacing. Somewhere I came to a conclusion with this story, but I could see myself working on it indefinitely. I took three major inspirations for “Prowler.” The first was the flash fiction story “Rumors of Myself,” by Steve Almond. It details a serial killer listening to news bulletins of his slayings on the radio. The detached tone and the slow realization of the identity of the narrator had me dumbstruck. The second was the story “Boy and Dog,” by Larry Brown. Brown’s story has a format almost poetic in its brevity. The story is composed of lines five words long; no more, no less. Despite this constriction, the story excels in tension and violence. I tried to do something similar with some of my syntax. The third inspiration, from which came my story’s name, is the album “Prowler in the Yard,” by American grindcore band Pig Destroyer. The music of “Prowler in the Yard” is abrasive and the vocals indecipherable; however, the lyrics, when read online, are actually quite poetic and beautiful. That juxtaposition of disturbing noise obscuring graceful lyrics inspired me. I tried to likewise obscure the narrator, creating unease with a distance between his actions and his identity. I had no other aim than to unsettle the reader.

I imagine the sequence of these stories as a thematic disintegration, from hope to despair, and laughter to horror. The first story, “Ballard Park in the Dark,” is a romance tale that only goes wrong at the very end, and even then not conclusively. “Barber Illusions” doesn’t deal with death, but rather the indignity before death. Because of this, it maintains a throughline of humor over its nihilistic overtones. “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” acts as something of a volta, changing the weight of the stories toward heavier, darker conclusions. I see the volta happening exactly with Icarus’ italicized “splash” representing the introduction of true suffering without relief. “The Skywriter” continues this trend, taking a humorous concept and spinning it into solipsistic disaster. Finally, “Prowler” is a straight-on horror story. The force of derealization and detachment from the preceding stories compounds with “Prowler,” forming a narrator who can’t even use pronouns.

What I have learned throughout my thesis process has been sparse and hard won. It will take a thousand more stories before I have something to be proud of. But it is exactly this process, the experimentation, that will get me there. For that, I have to thank my teachers; without their guidance, I would be nowhere. Let this story chapbook stand as a indicator of things to come, and hopefully one day I will read it as a reminder of how far back I’ve been.

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Ballard Park in the Dark

If I look at the ground, squint until it blurs, and visually erase my Haute Tension brand integrated sneakers the same way I forget to see the end of my nose, I can see the gray speckled concrete and imagine that I am in any other place and time.

But if I look up, the sea of unnatural light burning up the retinal night lashes me back to modernity. Casters bobbing up and down, strung along to resemble Chinese lanterns, offering faces smoothed of their ugliness and laquered in liquid crystal hi-definition. Consumer grade casters jellied to heads with organic glue; live-feed social media wrapping the eyes, inch radius filter mods shelling the body, islands of soft light communing. Fourth of July in Tupelo, Mississippi.

Ballard Park has a mutefield of three inches most everywhere. Projections are allowed to be cast up to three inches from the body of the caster; anything further is digitally wiped. People cast their moles off, cast their teeth straight. Some even try to cast a few pounds off their waistline, to embarrassing effect. I walk past a white woman casting herself black. Slight angles of cheekbones and jawlines give it away, so that I have to peek out of the corner of my eye. There are casted accessories, American flags, buttons of political affiliation. This is the reason for the mutefield; so that every square foot of park isn't slogan, advertisement, agitative shilling and signalling. Governor Forrest wanted a "wholesome, community-oriented celebration that will bring Mississippi together."

I push past a line around the snow cone stand on my way to the stage. In the back of the line, my ex-girlfriend turns toward me, unsure recognition on her face. Manipulating the thumbcon in my pocket, I rapidly cast into a heavysset Native American

woman and hustle onward. She looks after me, blinks and shakes her head. At a safe distance, I revert to myself: thin, white, teenaged, indistinct. I would use optic camo mods if they were legal.

The disguise runs off my face, replaced by a news and media HUD. I browse while I walk; roadside fireworks stand busted— Dixie flag casted anonymously over National Guard show, riot ensues— projected tax increase to accommodate rising unemployment rate— I reach the stairs to the stage and thumb off my caster. The show is in between revues, so there are only other teenagers with me back here, doing whippets and casting. Up onstage I can see over the bloom of casted light to the dark skyline. I scan the negatives of shadow between the casters for her, for Basemath.

I met her a week ago in the Mall at Barnes Crossing, “Place with It All!” I saw It All, saw the Foot Locker, the Great American Cookie, the caster kiosks and AR/VR sim stores, the thronged food court, the ancient halted carousel, the gutted arcade, the BDSM massage parlor festooned with licenses and ads: “SSC/RACK CERTIFIED, WIITWD: CBT, EMS, K9, TPE— TODAY’S SPECIAL: ROPEPLAY.

The display in the next store caught my eye: lunar farming equipment. I lingered by the Scrugg’s window, looking at the balloonish tires on the tractor, wondering if my brother ever rode a machine like that up there.

The simcaster pleasure dome stuck like a parasite to the side of the mall. It was cheaply made out of reinforced limestone particle board, with basic domedot casters stuck everywhere, projecting red carpet and expensive wallpaper. Punks often take bats and rakes to the limestone, chipping ragged holes. If you look through the holoFX

awning, you can still see the ghostly outline of M A L C O. I bought my ticket and was escorted to the teen section. Wild shapes and colors spun through the room like a collapsing galaxy. Identities, flirtations, insults and spastic energy manifested through colliding vectors. The teen room had no mute field; free expression shot out in loud eye-aching prismatics. Kaleidoscopes of conversation attracted me, morphed into alienating gabbermuck, repelled me onward. I saw an obscene visualization of the recent Liberty Bowl shot through with racial slurs and genitalia before being obscured with prime color abstractions. I pushed into the darkest corner of the room.

I thought I was alone in the dark, until I heard a cough to my right. Jumping, I flung my dim halo of casterlight there, and out of the darkness rose a face.

“Basemath.”

“What?”

For a second I thought she might be speaking a different language. Where the hell was her caster?

“That’s my name. Basemath.”

Only two brown eyes and the outline of a face were visible.

“Yeah, and my castname is Lotus, but you—”

“No, I mean my real name,” she said.

“What kind of name is that?”

Distorted patterns of color from the crowd danced over her face before sliding away.

“You never read the Bible?”

The rest of her came into my casterlight as she stepped closer. No caster. No projections. Not even makeup.

“Uh, no.”

Under me she blinked.

“My name’s John.”

The line between her lips curved imperceptibly.

“John’s a good biblical name. Double bonus; the Apostle and the Baptist.”

We looked at each other, tense with an expectation, opportunity balanced on the knife edge of politesse. A cone of pornogrind and gore pics peeled out of the din and filled the space between us.

“Want to get out of here?” I shouted.

We huddled together in the parking lot with the last feeble wireframe parking spaces lighting our backs, facing the dark green treetops. Basemath was born into some fringe Christian cult, one of the Luddite-lite variety. She had never worn a caster, never plugged in or fazed out. She told me how she was homeschooled, how she could only have paper books and woolen clothes. It took a year of begging before her mother let her come to the mall. It was her sixteenth birthday that day. We talked about the news, the suicides of celebrities she’d never heard of. The whole time we talked her hands kept fluttering up to tap at my caster.

“Do you want to try it on?” I finally asked. There was something illicit in the offer, and also kind-of erotic. It felt like getting close to her, closer than sitting together.

She started to say something, looked away.

“I’d... better not.”

I turned on the HUD to read the time: almost eleven, Basemath's curfew. We broke apart slowly, me to the parking lot and my car, her to walk the dark road. It never felt like that, not with my ex. Basemath was a trip I wanted to wrap my mind around. My heart thumped at the possibility of reading Song of Solomon in her lap, slipping my caster over her forehead. She refused a ride, but offered a meeting. Ballard Park, Fourth of July.

Against my will my foot is tapping, nervous to see Basemath. Hot saturation swims through Ballard Park, drowning us all in sweat. My eyes rove over the digitally washed masses. Featureless dolls, puggish single mothers, hideous sex perverts, schoolchildren, conspicuous pickpockets, cartoon amalgams, beer-glazed rednecks, lawyers with waving flag ties, meth fiends, livestream clout kings, body doubles, elders, all races real and unreal, lagging silhouettes, freaks too ugly to cast off deformities, and somewhere in the black spaces between...

I see Basemath under an oak tree, waving a hand at me. She's wearing a blue woolen sweater and knee-length skirt. Under the black fringe of her bangs I can't see her eyes.

In seconds I'm bounding off the stage and wading through the crowd. An errant knee crushes into my groin. "Oh lawd, sorry!" I hear, staggering, trying to walk it off.

Basemath comes out from under the oak tree, giggling, and grabs my hand. Before I can say anything, she's pulling me with her.

"Follow me," she shouts over the noise.

We circle around the pond, the ducks hopping on shore in search of bread. Two kids in generic caster face skins are breaking duck eggs against the pavement. Basemath takes me past the empty plastic playground, the sunken fishing pier, and the snow cone stand. I compare her hand in my right hand with the thumbcon in my left; warm skin to hard plastic. My face gets hot. She stops us beside the skate park. Milling teenagers are doing whippets and casting nearsighted skate videos.

“Listen, I don’t know how to say this—” I start when she sees a short man come out of the public restrooms, and grabs my arm. At the moment the door swings past us, I hear *Countdown to live patriotic music!* I’m hustled inside, lock clicking behind me.

My eyes adjust to the gritty phosphorescent bulbs. Along the wall is a rusty aluminum sink, a smudged mirror, a changing table. Family restroom. One of the only places in the park where the mutefield is disabled. Some people have become so disgusted with themselves that they cast over their bodily functions. Scenic waterfall, majestic avalanche. The cone of light from my caster extends experimentally. Basemath tests the lock a third time.

Ten!

She turns to face me. I can’t place her expression. She’s biting her lip; excited? Worried? I want her to wonder about me this way. My temple is pounding against my caster.

Nine!

I reach for the whippets in my pocket, something to burn off the edge. I take them out of my blue jeans, round polychromatic capsules, and Basemath brushes them off my palm and onto the floor. Her body is close up against me. Her hair smells like handmade

soap. I start to move my arms around her. She reaches up and slides off the caster from my temple.

Eight!

“Why’d you do that?”

She says, “That thing weirds me out.”

“Want to try it on?”

Seven!

She holds the tiny plastic caster in her palms. I put my arms around her, folding her tight to me until the hands with the caster stick between us like a baby.

“I don’t know,” Basemath says.

Six!

The front of her blue woolen sweater scratches against my T-shirt. Looking at her without my caster, I feel indecent, more naked than naked. Skinless.

“What does it feel like?” she asks.

Five!

“Like having two minds at once. A whole extra mind to store every thought you never want to forget. And you can make anything look the way you want it to.” I pause.

“And there’s a part of me in there. In the user data. You could really know me.”

She turns the caster over in her hand, looks up at me.

“Okay.”

Four!

I fasten the caster on her head, massage the dermal glue in with small circles. She has her hands clasped in front of her, an anxious prayer. I wipe the glue off on my jeans, tilt her head back mid-prayer, and kiss her.

Three!

She'll know soon enough what I feel for her. Even if only a fraction comes through the caster, it will be enough. Someday, I can get Basemath her own caster, and on boring days we can put on each other's casters, lounge around and bask in our pent-up mutual love.

Two!

I put the thumbcon in her hand. She clenches it like a rosary. I close my hand around her's, my finger over the power button.

"Ready?"

Basemath leans into me.

"Yes."

One!

All at once the celebration music begins. Truly all at once; by some fluke of code or targeted hack, the entire playlist disgorges, every file diluted into one impenetrable noise.

My country 'tis of O beautiful for spacious skies Oh give me a home where the Buffalo O say can you see by the dawn's early Yankee Doodle keep it up You're a grand old flag you're a high-flying flag

When I look down at Basemath, she drops the thumbcon. I stoop to pick it up, and she collapses against me. The caster sticks hard to her temple, and I struggle to get it off.

“Basemath? Hey, hey!”

The caster rips off, leaving a red outline. Her eyes are rolling back in her head. From the back of her throat comes a gurgling noise, and foam leaks down her blue woolen sweater. Her body starts seizing up, and I pin her body with mine as I put two fingers in her mouth.

“Jesus Christ. Can you hear me?”

I can see pink capillaries in the whites of her eyes. Basemath thrashes in my arms, bites my fingers. I try to drag her backward. My heel lowers on the caster, crushing it behind me.

States may sing their songs of praise

I wish I was in the land of cotton

Barber Illusions

Nobody has a good reason for coming to Las Vegas.

The Strip wants you to feel like a winner. The buildings are so new they still have price tags. The clouds over the synthetic sunset are marshmallows injected with silicone. Everyone here is a loser. From my table outside In-N-Out, I see a man stuffing his face with one-dollar deep-fried Oreos. His gut hangs down to the concrete like a tongue licking an ashtray. I pinch my own flab and roll it with unease.

I have very little money. I have massive regrets. I wish to exchange the two like poker chips. The drive from Sacramento to Vegas felt like some terminal exit journey. A salmon run: take what vitality is left and charge upstream. In my case, the goal isn't spawning. I tried that; a vasectomy cost a thousand dollars, and I'm paying a monthly jackpot in alimony. My mission is "fuck-you" money, transformative amounts of money, enough money to make a forty-three-year-old bachelor add up to something. I won't settle for less than one hundred million dollars. My feet list toward the Mirage. Almost any casino would do. They line up together like cheap whores, faces mashed childishly with neon lipstick. Automatic doors hush me out of the curtaining dark.

Immediately I am assaulted by uncertainty. What is the difference between the Jaws 3D slot machine and the Ghostbusters slot machine? Would I have better odds with the pock-faced septuagenarian blackjack dealer, or the man? Why is the Wheel of Fortune machine in the center of the room? It beckons with the cultish gravity of an

obelisk. I sink a dollar into a slit in Pat Sajak's head. A sea green telescreen projects the word bank and clues. None of the them make sense to me. "Places Overseas," 12 letters, 3 Ns. I've never been overseas. The seconds tick one at a time to zero. Vanna White's hologram peels away the letter boards like scabs. "Nanjing, China." Where the hell is that?

I smoke my three-dollar cigar and wait for a cocktail waitress to come ask for my order. They are shrewd tellers, these fishnet monitors. Until I pass the ten-dollar threshold, I will not be granted a "complimentary" drink. With my fingers I pantomime massive reckless gambles on this video poker machine. I don't fool any of the waitresses. Reluctantly I feed the ultimate tenth dollar. A beautiful blonde perm out of time materializes near my shoulder and I place my order, a gin and tonic.

If I had to diagnose where it first went wrong, I would say it was the first grade. I once drew a picture of a bird with crayons. The teacher cooed over my shoulder, "How beautiful!" and put a sticker yellow star on it. I found that drawing years later, after I failed out of college. Not a scrap of talent evident; didn't look like any bird I ever saw. Why did she lie to me? Let me think I was good at something? I was fed shit way into a long and painful post-adolescence, the effects of which I don't have the time to reverse or alleviate.

Two hundred dollars down the drain. My life's savings. The stream of gin and tonics has left me spluttering. These lithe Playboy bunny waitresses can tell a bankrupt

when they see one. I'm in the monetary drunk tank. Outside the Mirage it's cold. I stuff my hands in my pockets and walk towards my hotel. On the highway overpass a black man talks without looking at me, "Youwan weed?" I do. Twenty dollars a joint. We lean against the cyclone fencing, face the caravan of limousines and Ubers coming to settle the West. In my pockets I find change I didn't know I had. A fistful of dessicated purple buds tumble into my hand, no dimebag even. At the convenience store, I overdraft my last credit card and buy rolling papers. I pray there are matches in my room.

I proposed in the middle of Times Square with a cheap ring from Jared. We met at an Orange Julius. She served me divorce papers at the Barnes & Noble. I thought she was the One; I fear there is no One; I am nobody's One. I'm not even a full integer. On a night toward the end I woke up sweating and I turned over and the look in her eyes was on the level of a machine with inhuman logic and cruel intent. "You were snoring," she said. "I was having a nightmare." She turned back over on her side. From there went the money and the sex, and I have figured there was never any love in the equation. A transaction happening in an air-conditioned room, with smiling stock pictures on the wall, a tired cashier.

Circus Circus is the hidden floor below the barrel. For curiosity's sake I stuff a circular corn chip into a penny slot. A woman with crow's feet older than the 19th Amendment bends towards my mustard-stained polo and says, "Whaddyall have, sugar?" I shoo her away. I can't tell her track marks from her wrinkles.

My father was a fat torso and a head chomping a cigarette. That's how I always saw him, in the armchair, smoking three packs of Kents and watching the news. The pictures on the mantle showed a man with long hair, taut muscles, and square white teeth. He smoked it away. Once I asked him what he wanted to be when he was young. "Quarterback for the NFL," he said. He died of a heart attack, age fifty-five. He smoked away nothing but a heart and some teeth.

The fire escape hangs sheared off the side of a Circus Circus annex over me. I'm cramming weed, stems and all, into a sheaf of crinkled Zillas. I haven't done this since high school, couldn't do it then, somehow worse today. Finally I lick and tuck a joint the shape of a busted vacuum bag, light it, the match goes out, light again, red spark, pull, and there is the familiar lukewarm burn of shit weed. I don't even feel high. I don't remember what it feels like.

It's time to go to sleep. The ambiguous brown carpet next to my bed has the outline of a quarter-fed Magic Fingers machine. I wish it were still there. My hangover is oblonging into the present-future. I turn down the sheets, kick off my rotten Chucks, retrieve the toothbrush from my luggage. I don't floss; never have. Consider pocketing the scented soap. Decline; would probably clog my pores. Slip naked, jump into bed. *Squish!* A pat of somebody's stale cum flattens on my back like a cow pat. I take the sleeveless pillow and sleep on the brown carpet.

No continental breakfast. I've come to the end, but nothing has ended. Shaving my face with an old disposable razor, I consider my options. Payday loan; not with my

credit. Back to Sacto; not enough gas. Suicide; not yet. The day is young, and if a prison or homeless shelter is waiting at the end of the night, so be it. I go to the front desk to check out. The keycard looks like a playing card in the concierge's hand. I fold.

I drive my rented Kia Soul across the thumbled flat desert. Add to my constipation debt at In-N-Out. Breakfast burrito. I have no shared history with these people, these altered Martians. 97.1 The Point, Ten After Laughter, radio buzz comedy noise I didn't know was on. "So I went to the local dyke bar the other day..." Turn it off. Even if the punchline were funny, John Mellencamp must follow. Cut losses. Red light. Look out the window. Strip malls bleed endlessly into each other forever. Green light. The cheap neon letters run and elide like film fed into a projector: *Barber Illusions Nails Tan Sex Toys Payday Loans Betting Pool Chlorine Kleen Tobacco Wine & Spirits Gaming World Peace Christ Dispensary*.

Noon threatens with light and heat. The Vegas sun will suck the water through your pores with UV straws and leave you in a chalk outline of sweat. I park in the lot of a closed CrossFit gym. I want to see people, be close to them. I pull up Groupon with my iPhone 4S. Free tickets in my area: U2 cover band... disgraced off-Broadway ventriloquist... celebrity wax museum... Penn and Teller—a goatee and a midget swim out of my adolescent memories. Somewhere is the sense of contentment. I book a seat for the Penn and Teller show at the Rio.

A dark pall descends on us in the audience. Plaintive cheers leap sparsely from us like stray kernels denting the lid of our anxious Jiffy Pop. Neither Penn nor Teller are here yet. Instead an ambiguously young, ambiguously blonde woman is rushing the stage. The CHEER sign blinkers red and we obey. Her set consists of ambiguously offensive

jokes. I don't want to cheer. I don't want to be implicated. The sea of losers around me stop cheering, too. The towhead provocateur charges into new depravities. Diminishing returns. Awkward gaps of silence that can't be edited in post. This experience will surely be cut.

Penn and Teller arrive. One is the short one and one is the fat one. I can't be bothered. The theme of the show is busting magic tricks. A ear-quarter procurist is taken to task; he throws the quarters from his sleeve and catches them behind the ears. Penn's ill-fitted suit crinkles around his paunch like a gift unwrapping itself. Teller is a mute-autist, likely a Vegas son, product of fetal alcohol syndrome. Or its an act. On the massive flatscreen above us, Gilbert Gottfried wavers in with an apparition's fuzz and blear. Guest appearance. Jokes prepackaged and prerecorded, post-funny. CHEER. We surge forth with obeisance. I just want to be a part of something.

The show is almost over. I start to get angry. I can't say I'm surprised, but seeing the lie so naked stirs me. The camera crew throw a ball into the audience. The catcher would get a buffet coupon for the Rio. An old man catches it, fumbles, drops it. The cameras retrain on the man and thread new film. "Can we do that again?" a production assistant asks. There is no serendipity, and no hope for salvation. Reruns of game shows; bagged. Exuberant sitcom punchlines; canned laughter. The imperfect is cut away and disposed. My waste can only be useful as fodder. This makes me angry. A vein trembles on my forehead, and a migraine is coming on.

Penn waves his hands toward the back doors.

“And now, we have a very special guest magician. She’s just starting out, but I think she has a lot of talent. Ladies and gentlemen, give a round of applause for my daughter!”

A young girl runs up to the stage. She’s carrying a deck of cards. A microphone is lowered for her.

“Um, so today I will be doing a card trick.”

Weak shuffling. She’s shaking slightly and looking down at her hands.

“Okay, here Dad— um, sir.”

People laugh, but she doesn’t turn and pose or smile. The CHEER sign stays off. I’m enthralled. Penn pulls a card, shows it to us. King of hearts. Puts it back. She tries to shuffle again, ends up mashing the cards awkwardly into a deck. With a jerking flick of her hand, almost dropping it, she pulls out a card.

“Is this your card?”

“Uh, no sweetie,” Penn smiles toward the crowd.

Big applause. She draws again. Nothing going. Her eyes pull down with a strange smile and her father raises her arms in conciliation. She wears an expression of embarrassment. I start to feel a real emotion.

“Well, maybe next time,” and they hug and bow for us.

I cannot conceive how this could be edited into entertaining television. For that I am guardedly hopeful. Real experience, the silence and the failure, the stuttering graceless song, might have a future. I might have a future.

The floodlights peter out as the lines wind to the exit. I think of the low puddle of gas sloshing in my Kia Soul; might be enough daylight left to get to a job center. I could

live here, work as a card dealer. Then I see Penn's daughter with her hand cocked on her hip outside the theater doors. She's checking her phone and fanning her cards. Not a king of hearts in the bunch.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

The plough— the pain— all that are— to let alone a moment— impossible— my right hand— the heavy handle— intolerable weight— it cannot be heavier— it is— my left hand— the switch— to spur the horse's ass— I swat— miss more than not— cannot look up— the plough will swerve— look down— thumb blister— fit to burst— the heat— sweat— coats of it— some ancient— red shirt— hoped for anger— like a bull— it's working— these clogs!— aching— all my pains— distinct— impossible— see— corner of eye— shepherd— curse him— his lot— slow lambs— I would kill him— for his lot— my lot— a horse's ass— plough swerves— a debt of pain— to right it— no strength left— plough rolls on— back in step— how did it come to this— my youth— blotted— my wife— blotted— that tree there— sound of waves— ships swaying— blotted blotted blotted— with sweat— haze around me— with the plough— what I think is out there— what has always been— shep*splash*herd— sheep— tree— I will pass it— soon— soon— off to the right— cliffs— water— the angler— sat by the water— I would drown him— for his lot— a fish is a feather— to a horse's ass— and this plough— I sense green— passing the tree— only half the day— now— only!— not thinking— would be better— be like the horse— my hurt— my hurt— is louder— my breath— gale storms— my blood— crash my head— think back— never wasn't ploughing— the plough moves— and somehow— I stay still— horsetail lifts— turds drop— soon I tread them— sweat rains down head— catches in eye— nose itch— no free hand— cannot dare— achoo!— swat harder— my pain— suffer the horse— lightheaded— the indignity— parts wearing out— no replacements— think forward— see nothing— nights too late— days too

early— peasant grave— seeds planted— drought— one nameless day— months away—
harvest festival— brief holiday— to sleep through—

The Skywriter

VOTE PETER BELL FOR A BETTER CONGRESS

JESUS IS THE TRUTH N THE LITE

JEAN WILL U MARY ME

GOD LOVES U

HOLMAN'S DISCOUNT TIRES CALL 1-800-478-2237

The last one was hard for him because they insisted on the apostrophe. He usually refuses symbols, shapes, and any and all punctuation beyond a dash, but he needs the money bad. Skywriting has seen something of a recession recently.

He has a little office off main street, tucked between a bar and a bicycle repair shop, catty-corner to the drugstore. The window reads "Express Skywriting, Ads & Personals, Negotiable Rates." Tasteful font, perfect kerning, clean white letters. Just like his skywriting. He painted it by himself, after all. He might have been a type designer in another life. Or a scribe.

When a customer comes in, he gives them an index card to write their message on. His rule is, if it can't fit on an index card, he won't write it. Sometimes a customer gets smart and turns the card over, and then writes real small. At such times, the skywriter tears the card neatly in two. "Revise, revise, revise," he sings.

He drives on down to his sheet metal hanger, gets in his humdinger plane, and checks the fuel and oil. He pins the index card to the dash. It flaps like a playing card in a bicycle spoke, a mile up in the sky, through loop-de-loops and tailspins. The words hang taut in the air like hair ribbons. It's paraffin oil. It comes out the exhaust at the push of a button, white as rice. He closely follows the spelling on the index card. Sometimes customers misspell words on purpose because they pay by the letter. Sometimes the mistakes are genuine. The skywriter sees a moral in this: accident or not, it all looks the same in the sky.

Cloudy days are a no-go. Not only is it dangerous, but the words are obscured. He doubts if businesses care too much. When called about rescheduling, most bosses say forget it, keep the money. Skywriting is an old tradition, soon to be consigned to history. He keeps it alive, not for the money, what little of it there is. He senses the potential for skywriting as a means of expression. When the letters are up there against all that blue, it looks like God sent a telegram. There is an authority up there that print cannot match. The skywriter has thought about this a lot, but wastes words trying to express it. The form is more important than the message, is the closest he has come to summarizing what he feels about his craft. So when the sky gets even the first pillow peek of cumulus, he locks the office door and puts a CLOSED sign inside the window.

The following day a woman walks into his office. She looks like a mid-air collision, with her runny makeup and blown hair. He reads her index card and raises his eyebrows.

“Ma’am, you sure about this?”

“Yes.”

HAROLD CUT THE BOOZE YOU FAILURE

He slices the words into the blue air and turns around to return to the hangar. The form is being used for expression, but not what he had in mind. Children playing ball in the park look up at the sky and squint. Up this high, the looks on their faces are illegible. He looks back at the words, considers the weight the evaporating letters hold. Angelic cuneiform. Divine hieroglyph.

A day later, a thin man in loose clothing stomps through the front door. He scratches at the card quickly and thrusts it at the skywriter. This is becoming a dangerous narrative. Genre conventions point to a bad ending: a scene in his office, a tawdry melodrama terminating in litigation. The man is pulling bills out of his wallet when the skywriter says,

“I don’t think this is a good idea. Look, I can give you the money back from—”

“I don’t want your charity. And I don’t care how much it costs.”

The skywriter considers the offer. Maybe this story goes somewhere unexpected. Maybe this will elicit some higher expression, inspire self-reflection.

NINA STOP SPENDING MY MONEY YOU FUCKING BITCH

When the sky curses, an element of the apocalyptic enters the tired language. This is the first time he has put a cuss up here. Magnified to these proportions, the skywriter cannot register offense or titillation. Only a sigil, an inscrutable abstract code. Conversation is no better to the skywriter, nor is reading. We approximate and the gaps between the meaning and the word is atmospheric, atomic in sheer range and scale. “I love you” hardly ventures into the gut phenomenon of love, and over time, as the words are repeated and tolerated for lack of better ones, the feeling itself dissipates. For the skywriter, a sonnet does no better. The words chosen are rarer, and their positions unorthodox, but the effect is no closer to experience. He has read many books and has since given up. If there is a chance for true expression, the skywriter gambles on its discovery in the clouds.

Today is a beautiful day so the skywriter is nervous. He considers leaving early when the woman comes back. Haggard, drawn lines on her face cutting through her foundation, she writes on the card and throws it at him, wrapped around hundred dollar bills. The love story is falling along familiar tracks, and the skywriter is beginning to regret his decision.

“Keep the change, I sold his car.”

HAROLD LUM IS A LIMP-DICK WASHED-UP
SICKOPHANT

He crosses the T and nosedives for the perpendicular line. G-force closes in on his skull like dying asleep. He thinks, if I just took my hands off the wheel, off the pen, I would throttle into the beyond like everyone has and everyone must. Dangerously close to the ground, he pulls the wheel back and rockets upward, emptying the smoke reserves into a triumphant underline. Before it is blown away, perhaps a pedestrian will look up, see a hovering cloud of paraffin oil, and wonder how close to death they are.

The man comes back the next day and calmly, deliberately writes out his message. He slides the index card into a folded check, and he says to the skywriter,

“If you take money from her again, you’re next.”

The skywriter reads the card as the man leaves. So that’s what it feels like, he thinks. Climax.

I ’ L L S E E Y O U I N C O U R T N I N A

When he wheels around after finishing the A, he sees the people in the park reading his work. Children pausing the ninth inning, picnics halted mid-course, kissing couples stopped in lip-lock. The conclusion to their daily serial. The real story, the skywriter knows, is stuck inside them. Every person a a novel, twenty volumes, a library of qualia and memory aching for voice. It would be better if he aims the plane at them, quickens the FIN. with a firebombed period. We are all sentenced to solitary confinement, and ten concrete walls are between the next prisoner who knows Morse Code. The skywriter angles homeward.

The morning after is gray and hazy. The weatherman predicts a thunderstorm in the afternoon, possibly a tornado. Residents are to listen to the reports and seek shelter at the first warning. The skywriter loads his plane up with oil and takes off into the stratus dream.

AND THAT BRINGS US TO NOW

And that brings us to now. I've been turning all about in this dimensional page, writing this, writing T H I S. I have given up on connection. Expression is for the self, if it has any utility. I don't even think the words will stick long in this weather, and there is sure as hell nobody outside to read this anyway. There's only so much smoke oil left, and I don't intend on going back for more. I want to do all those fancy symbols one last time, see if I have it in me. Watch this:

! * % & @ # + = ?

You can write anything you want to when you know no one's reading. What would Nina and Harold say about each other up here, alone in the light? Let the words hiss out like a sigh.

THIS TOWN IS A CURSE AND HELL IS ON EARTH

I don't feel better but I don't feel worse. I see the words in my mind and feel them leave through my hands, feel them vibrating the cockpit. I can't tell up from down. I wonder if I wrote something truly true out there. The map and the territory. Conversion of matter into language, DNA translation. I keep my finger on the button, I just want to get rid of all the smoke, but I'm still writing, I can see the letters out my window. Where is all this smoke coming from?

WHERE IS ALL THIS SMOKE COMING FROM?

Prowler

Full dark. No moon. Hard silence.

The blacktop road curls out of the silence humming with crickets and cicadas and cockroaches. Listen for the static, the white noise of green and straw. Cockroaches fly and skitter, racing on the yellow lines, their hard bodies glinting off the reflector strips, setting off the street lamps, opening the harsh yellow eyes. The forest is an open vein leaking the street in arcing arterial spray. The street and at the end a house in the dark. Right jean pocket. Inside is a computer printed map folded and folded squares. Chewing gum. Fake license. Pills: small and red and white and round and blue and black. Pills rattling softly together. Picture of it with sharp laminate edges and splattered come. Left pocket is cut out.

Hip flask. Cold corn water gasoline. Tool belt. Little pockets and metal buttons and one long pocket. Serrated. Blended leather grip, cloth wrapped. Belt loops. Climbing rope threaded through them. Spray can. Dollar store camera.

Steel toed. Twitchy fingered. Eyes swallowed in nighttime. Severed parts.

A snake spools out of the mud, over the steel toes, toward lighted road. Steel toes pin the tail, crush the rattle, splitting plastic into noise. The snake whips back and its needle teeth scrape on denim. Whipping around and around. Needles with venom drops wet and full. The snake spells itself and the needles catch and sink through the denim, through the skin. Steel toes rise slowly. Two heartbeats; one in the chest, one in the foot. The snake spirals in mad parabolas over the road. Steel toes are thumping, pulsing, and the heel crushes the head. The needle teeth bend and snap. Test tubes and a puddle of acid.

Two red circles on a denim flag rise and fall beside the street behind the streetlights. Cars pass. The road slits into a dirt path rutted and muddy. Tire wells half full of water. Trees shadow the path: tall strangers holding hands above. Silence. No insects. Chewing gum pop.

The house sways up from the path through the trees. A single yellow eye; shining window. Second story. No cars. Front porch steps. Boot creaks wood. Boot throb and the steel toes wiggle, dying worms. Swallow gum. Palm of candy pills washed down with corn water. Slowly ascending. Listen. No dog. Snap button off the long pocket. Short nails gripping the clothed handle. Unsheathed and smiling rays in the dark.

Porch swing tethered with chains. Still as a whisper.

Unfurled map. Satellite picture. Letters on the mailbox. Two two five four. Map back into pocket. Off the porch. The tall one and the fat one and the little one gone. It is alone.

Yellow eye in the window.

Shadows wrap around the house. One yellow-eyed spotlight cut into squares. Full moon. Against the white paint siding, following the wall. Hunting a black box. Round the corner and the box cowers over the baseboard. Heavy rusted lock. Aerated spray can. Plastic cap. Ribbed white nozzle. Liquid blasts the frozen hole. Knife levered in and a hard tap. Shatter. Bundled wires grasped. Guttled. Somewhere a dial tone evaporates. The yellow eye blinks off.

Snaking back for the porch, knife in hand and hand in pocket. Night without eyes.

Crouched behind the porch swing. Listen. Stairs and wood creak and door handle and hello hello like a question. Tongue bitten quiet. It goes again up the stairs. Piss streams down the pant leg wetting swollen toes. Tongue and teeth separate. Breathe and hiss. Left

hand grips the handle. Locks and deadbolt. A slow slumping halter to the side windows.
Ten miles from anywhere. No crickets even.

The window yawns chest high with red curtains. Serrated knife scraping circles. Palm on
glass and push. Full moon falling. Crawling inside.

Pills jump up and down as the knife swims quietly through rooms. Spine folded and
crouched. Furniture. Wallpaper. Doorway. Staircase.

Silence waits silence. Left hand feeling pulses, threading blood subway tunnels,
connecting telephone lines of blood from throbbing steel toes to pill candied heart. Three
heartbeats. It opens the bedroom door and walks to the bathroom. Up the balcony, water
playing music tinkles down the stairs. Boots on the stairs.

Its room. Clothes littering the carpet; raptured bodies. Drawers pulled out pell mell.

Closet door with white slats. The knife sails into the warm, close dark there. Eyes looking
through ladder shades into the room. Its dresses and skirts hanging down on twisted
hangers. Its cotton shirts and hosiery, its fluttering limbs suspended in air, hogtied and
gutted. By the left hand a loose pile of its underwear. Strawberry printed panties sucked
through a nostril—

and in spite of the pills, the moonshine, the snakebite, the long and delirious night, in
spite of myself a self is reasserted, however wan and wavering; I remember when I was
somebody, matter displacing space, slept during the night, talked during the day; before
everything, mind and gut, were pushed outward to be the skin, to be veins throbbing
around a ghost, surface tension and eyeless sight; I was somebody and it was
somebody—

Plunger flush. Quick steps. Weaving a cocoon, buried under clothes. The knife wrapped in the panties. Door opens. Looking through closet slats. It sits on the bed. It waits in the dark.